

The Fat Peasant Woman From Simbirsk

1986 Words

Nicholas's boots were coiled in satin ropes and he spun from the ceiling, left, then right, steady as a pendulum. The imperial train seemed to glide, skating in a serpentine way, through the country. He hung upside down beneath his chandelier with its branches of gold, the jewels which sprouted from them clinking gently. Grasping for momentum, his palms graced the floor. No growl of wheels across that scarred, upturned earth.

Peasants lined the track, polishing it smooth. From his trapeze they blurred into the landscape as the smoke from the train gowned them in silverish plumes. Lines of carts and weary horses cut through the frozen steppe, families marching forward with clothes blackened by shell fire. Children perched on overladen donkeys, their mothers trudging beside, carrying babies on their backs and their chests. Nicholas twirled until they were out of sight, twisting like a loose tooth to the pulse of the train. From the next carriage came a terrible wail, in discord with the grating of the brakes. Still drifting, left, then right, he stumbled.

Alexandra was with Anna, her lady in waiting and dearest friend, when the telegram came. In her favourite boudoir, its walls the anaemic purple of a fading bruise, she collapsed to her knees in prayer. Anna crossed herself frantically, perched stiffly upright in her wheelchair.

“Take some cocaine for the melancholy, Alix dear!”

From a dainty jar, Alexandra inhaled some before passing it to her friend. Anna remembered in a wash of pain the months before, the screeching of the train, the wreckage and the days following when the world was a thick smog of sleep and even her bedsheets seemed to burn. He had stood beside her, held her hand as he muttered prayers, and pulled her back into a bright day in January, his eyes as pale as the sky.

“You must call our friend, Alexandra. For poor Alexey, to save the little Tsarevich, you must. Call Father Grigory, call him now!”

Disorientated by tears, Alexandra stumbled to the telephone in the hall, placed on a cabinet beneath a portrait of Marie Antoinette whose painted eyes stared, blurred slightly with sympathy, tinted with reproach.

Grigory Rasputin was occupied when the call came. In his little apartment the shrill voice of a soprano crackled from the gramophone. The floorboards creaked beneath his daughters’ feet, slipping into pirouettes as they danced with their father. A woman called Akilina lay behind them on a worn sofa, sinking into it. Its frame was cracked like ribs. It had been broken, Grishka recalled, by the antics of a fat peasant woman from Simbirsk. A coarse laugh came from his throat, putrid as if coughing up phlegm. He rustled his fingers in his beard laced with filth, and reached for the hand of the maid, Dounia, who emerged from his bedroom, her nightgown wrinkled with sleep.

“It’s night already?” she asked, squinting, as the telephone began to shriek.

“Shall I turn off the music, Papa?” asked his daughter, Varya.

“No, darling,” he cackled, “let her dance with us!” His foul breath whistled into the mouthpiece.

“Hello, here is Grishka!”

Grishka's voice rushed through the telephone cable, pumping like a vein, across Petrograd. By that hour the city wore a sky decisively black, jeweled with stars gleaming red. The premature nightfall of December bathed the cracked streets in pools and eddies of cold. The biting air was alive with smoke from his own hearth and many others. Little fires, searing the cold heart of that aching empire.

Alexandra did not need to speak. Her muffled sobs cut through the sleepless murmurs of the city. He understood. A ring of women surrounded him, stroking the silken shirt stretched across his shoulders, strained with thread-like tears weaving across his back like a web of capillaries.

"Do you like Grishka's shirt?" he said to the women, holding the telephone aloft and letting Alexandra whimper into the heavy air, "It was sewn by the Empress herself!"

Grishka pulled the telephone to his lips again, and cried coarsely, "How many times must Grishka tell you, *Matushka*, you must not fear for the Little One!"

The countryside engulfing the train whimpered as Nicholas crouched at the bedside of his son, Alexey. The crystalline lamps swung slowly in rings overhead. The boy's eyes flickered open, like the grey wings of the moths which fluttered to the ceiling, and clenched shut as they were stunned by the light.

"Will someone stop those damned lamps from swinging?" cried Nicholas, placing his hand across Alexey's cold forehead.

The boy's nose was covered in thick military bandages, soaked crimson. Nicholas brushed them aside, the face of his son the pristine white of a porcelain doll,

devastatingly pure. A red stain threaded through his shirtsleeve and Russia was flooded, gasping and drowning, by the tides of a nosebleed.

“I know I mustn’t,” wailed Alexandra into the telephone, “but how can I not, when God will not listen to my prayers? I need you, Father Grigory, to fall into your arms and surrender to your greater holiness!”

Anna listened, clutching the crucifix she wore against her chest. A gift from Father Grigory, blessed by his righteousness. She kissed it, and was serene. He had healed her miraculously, and the boy too. There was no fear for Alexey in her heart, only a kind of crooked gratefulness. That night, cold and vicious, they would see a miracle. She took a stale biscuit from a plate on the table, grainy pieces of fruit entrapped within it. Sprinkling it with a dusting of cocaine, she chewed it violently, and shouted.

“When is he coming, Alicky?”

Alexandra reappeared from the telephone with her eyes reddened, clawing at the furniture for balance.

“He’s not.”

After hanging up the call, Grishka waltzed to the gramophone and twisted the dial until the music grew stutteringly louder. He took a bottle of vodka from the table, and gulped it straight.

“Well, ladies, the night is young. Let us pray for the child, and dance!”

The train creaked into the station at Tsarskoe-Selo around midnight. The countryside surrounding Petrograd wore the pallor of winter, speckled with *dachas* and little villages through the snow-dressed pines. There was misery in the air, sprouting from the sterile earth. The Tsar's advisors had tried to address him, as he crouched in prayer in his carriage. The trapeze hung limp as a noose.

"Your Majesty, the troops are dying! And families too, children. They just walk, trying to escape it, their shirts worn to threads across their backs! Exiles of war in their own country!"

Nicholas closed his eyes, and rose to his feet slowly.

"Gentlemen, please. My son is not feeling well."

He insisted on carrying Alexey himself. The doctors protested, the servants' fear feebly suppressed as the Tsar passed by. Nicholas's joints clicked as he lifted the child, bundled in a cloud of quilts. Alexey's arm hung white and limp from his side, waving into the barren night as if on parade. The sheets, the floor, his father's shirt, became dappled with droplets of blood, sneering as they gleamed in the low light. The boy was lost to the jaws of dreams, his eyes rolling back feverishly, unable to sense his father's trembling embrace or the servants who surrounded him, as they crossed the threshold onto the frost laced platform.

There were wisps of snow in the air, and the women were wrapped in furs, with faces pale as wraiths in the moonlight. Alexandra ran to her husband, her cloak beating like wings in her wake. Behind her stood Anna with their daughters, still in their nightgowns, kissing Father Grigory's crosses obediently. Nicholas's boots skidded on the ice under

foot, and for a moment Alexey seemed to slip from his hold. A soldier rushed to them and grasped the boy's arms.

"Not so aggressive!" snarled Alexandra, caressing the child's face, as freezing as the air to her touch. His eyes were firmly shut, little snowflakes landing on the lashes.

"So where is Our Friend?" asked Nicholas quietly.

Alexandra almost buckled to her knees. Anna, swallowed by bearskins in her wheelchair behind, let out a cry. Almost primitive, it rattled in their ears, aching.

"He won't come, Nicky," she howled, "He won't come because of the war. He says the Russian people bleed like our son, that there are a million Alexeys, stricken across the empire. You must stop it, Nicky! Or my baby..."

She stared at her husband, his face creased with wrinkles, his eyes the dull grey of dirty snow on roadsides, in trenches. The servants crossed themselves wearily, whispering behind heavy scarves.

"They aren't like Alexey," he said.

"The doctors must be kept away, Our Friend insists. Father Grigory says they don't know anything."

"How can Grishka know that?" said Nicholas, sipping tepid tea in their boudoir.

Alexandra grinned weakly. "Why would you doubt him, Nicky? It's very silly. God knows, Our Friend says he won't come to help Alexey because of your war. Keep the doctors away, my dear."

Doctor Botkin slipped into the room of the Tsarevich without turning on the lights. He lit only a dim lamp at the child's bedside, where Alexey lay on his back in a cradle of nurses. The boy watched him feebly. He outstretched his hand, seeming to grasp for something - a hand to pull him from his world of sickly delirium. A fire had been lit in the hearth, casting a warmth over the woeful faces of the ikons which covered the wall above his bed. The doctor held a stick of metal into the flames, shining reddish in their depths. The vein which bled within the child's nose was thread thin, flowing blue and vengeful just beneath the skin. To cauterize it in that veil of night was good fortune, if not a miracle. Alexey yelped in pain, clenching his fist bitterly white, until his mother took hold of it.

"Nothing for the pain," she whispered to the nurses, "Our Friend insists."

The morning was late, the dawn pink and tender, streaked by branches bare and frost bitten. Nicholas sat in his breakfast room with his daughters, a spread of papers across the table. 'Something about the war,' they read aloud brightly.

When Grigory arrived Nicholas did not greet him, nor when his daughters ran to embrace him, and he ran his hands through their hair, the long strands becoming caught in the chipped crevices of his blackened nails. Grishka's voice was still heavy with vodka from the night before, when he entered the child's room. Alexey twirled his fingers in his mother's pearls, as she slept with her head on the side of his pillow, her

knees still bent in prayer. Grishka grinned, bending to her ear and whispering, “Wake up, *Matushka*.”

Still half wrapped in her prayers, Alexandra lurched awake to see Rasputin with his arm around her son. He sat up in bed, smiling as he laughed weakly. Grigory still wore the silk shirt she had sewn, stained with sweat around the armpits, clutching both mother and child with his arms outstretched.

“It’s a miracle.”

Grigory spoke softly, his Siberian accent bound tightly around his words. Nicholas pressed his ear to the wooden door, his eyes fixed on the grotesque man at his little son’s bedside, the darkness of his filthy hair catching the light. His wife breathed deeply with relief, lungfuls of air stained with Grishka’s odor of alcohol and sweat. Alexey watched him, his blue eyes suddenly alight and flickering with life, clutching the man’s hand as he seemed to shed the pain of the night before.

“Tell me a story Father Grigory, please?”

Rasputin smiled, his charred teeth an earthy brown under the gentle light of morning. He kissed the Empress on the hand.

“Alright, little Alyoshenka. Did Papa Grishka ever tell you the story of the fat peasant woman from Simbirsk?”